

SPEECH

OF

GERRIT SMITH,

ON WAR.

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GERRIT SMITH'S SPEECH.

MR. HOUSTON, of Alabama. I now call up the bills, which were reported from the Committee of the Whole on the state of the Union, with a recommendation, that they do pass, and which were under consideration when the House adjourned, last evening.

The House then took up "the bill making appropriation for the support of the Military Academy for the year ending June 30, 1855."

MR. SMITH, of New York. I propose, Mr. Speaker, to make some remarks on this bill.

MR. JONES, of Tennessee. I think, that the previous question was called on the bill, last evening.

MR. SMITH. I think not.

MR. CLINGMAN, of North Carolina. If the previous question was called, I object to the gentleman's proceeding to make any remarks.

MR. SPEAKER. The Clerk informed the Chair, that the previous question was not called, last evening.

MR. JONES. It was my impression, that it was called.

MR. SMITH. I believe, Sir, in the progress of the human race. I delight to dwell upon the idea of an ever-growing civilization. Hence it is, that I am afflicted at every demonstration of the war spirit. For the spirit of war, is the spirit of barbarism; and, notwithstanding the general impression to the contrary, war is the mightiest of all the hinderances to the progress of civilization. But the spirit of this bill is the dark, barbarous, baleful spirit of war; and, therefore, would I use all honorable means to defeat the bill.

It is strange—it is sad—that, in a nation, professing faith in the Prince of Peace, the war spirit should be so rampant. That, in such a nation, there should be any manifestation whatever of this spirit, is grossly inconsistent.

"My voice is still for war," are words ascribed to a celebrated Roman. But, as he was a pagan, and lived more

than two thousand years ago, it is not strange, that he was for war. But, that we, who have a more than two thousand years longer retrospect of the horrors of war than he had—that we, who, instead of but a pagan sense of right and wrong, have, or, at least, have the means of having, a Christian sense of right and wrong—that we should be for war, is, indeed, *passing strange*.

How vast, incomprehensibly vast, the loss of life by war! There are various estimates of this loss.

MR. ORR, of South Carolina. I rise to a question of order.

MR. SMITH. I mean to keep myself strictly in order.

MR. SPEAKER. The gentleman will state his question of order.

MR. ORR. I understand, that the bill, on which the gentleman from New York [MR. SMITH] is submitting his remarks, is a bill making an appropriation to support the Military Academy. I submit, that the rule of the House requires, that the gentleman shall confine himself to the subject-matter before the House. The gentleman has not been confining himself to the subject-matter, and I require the Speaker to decide between us.

MR. SMITH. If the gentleman denies, that the Military Academy has to do with war, then I appeal to the Speaker what would become of the Military Academy, were war to be abandoned?

The SPEAKER. The Chair understands, that the gentleman from New York [MR. SMITH] is opposing the appropriation of money for the maintenance of the Military Academy, on the ground, that war is to be condemned.

MR. SMITH. Certainly, Sir; and, therefore, beyond all doubt, I am in order.

The SPEAKER. The Chair is of opinion, that the gentleman from New York is in order.

MR. SMITH. I presumed, that the Speaker would so decide.

I was saying, Sir, when interrupted by the gentleman from South Carolina, [MR. ORR,] that there are various estimates of the loss of life by war. Burke's estimate, if my recollection is right, is, that thirty-five thousand millions of persons have perished by war; that is, some thirty-five times as many as the whole present population of the

earth. In Bible language : " Who slew all these ? " War slew them. And, when contemplating this vast slaughter, how natural to inquire, in other words of that blessed book, " Shall the sword devour forever ? "

And how immense the loss of property by war ! The annual cost of the war system to Europe alone, including interest on her war debt, exceeds a thousand millions of dollars. The Government of our own nation has expended, on account of the army and fortifications, more than five hundred millions of dollars ; and, on account of the navy and its operations, more than half that sum. But to ascertain the whole loss of property, which this nation has suffered by war, we must take into the reckoning many other items ; and, especially, the cost of the militia. Now, this last item, not according to mere conjecture, but according to the computation of those capable of making it, is fifteen hundred millions of dollars. Add, then, to what our nation has paid for war, and to her loss of property by war, the interest on these payments and losses, and you have an aggregate equalling a large share of the whole present wealth of the nation.

And, just here, Sir, I would say a few words on national debts. As such debts are, in the main, war debts, there can be no assignable limit to their accumulation, so long as war is thought to be necessary—for, so long, there will be wars—and, until war is abandoned, it will be held to be unjust and dishonorable to repudiate war debts, no matter how crushing, and increasingly crushing, from age to age, may be the burden of such debts. So commanding is the influence of war, and so world-wide and mighty the sentiment, which it has been able to create in favor of itself, that no debts are deemed more sacred and obligatory than war debts. And yet, so far from such debts being, in truth, sacred and obligatory, there is the most urgent and imperative duty to repudiate them. No doctrine should be more indignantly scouted than the doctrine, that one generation may anticipate and waste the earnings and wealth of another generation. Nothing is plainer than that the great impartial Father of us all would have every generation enter upon its course, unmortgaged and unloaded by prior generations. Nothing is plainer than that in those States of Europe, where the war debt is so great, that the very life-

blood of the masses must be squeezed out to pay the annual interest upon it, repudiation must take place, ere those masses can rise into even a tolerable existence. It is a very common remark, at the present time, that Europe needs a revolution. She does need a revolution. But she needs repudiation more. However, there never will be a decided and wholesome revolution in Europe, that does not involve repudiation. If a people, on whom the wars and crimes of past generations have entailed an overwhelming burden of debt, shall achieve a revolution, of which repudiation is not a part, their labor and sacrifice will be lost—their revolution will be spurious and vain. To say, that the people of England and Holland, where the war debt is so great, as to make the average share of each one of them, both children and adults, between two and three hundred dollars—

MR. ORR, (interrupting.) I rise to a question of order. I desire to know whether the point, which the gentleman is now making, about the debts of England and Holland, is in order.

SEVERAL MEMBERS. "Certainly!" "Certainly!"

MR. SMITH. I am insisting, that, where war is carried on, there will be war debts; and that where there are war debts, there will be the temptation, (and a temptation, which should be yielded to,) to repudiate them.

The SPEAKER. The bill before the House is to meet the expenses of the West Point Military Academy. The gentleman from New York is disposed to strangle, if I may use the expression, the supplies for that purpose. The bill brings up the whole character of the thing, as connected with war matters. The Chair decides, that the gentleman's remarks are in order.

MR. SMITH, (resuming.) I was about to say, when interrupted, that it is absurd to claim, that the people of England and Holland are morally bound to continue to dig from the earth, and to produce by other forms of toil, the means for paying the interest on their enormous war debt. They are morally bound to refuse to pay both interest and principal. They are morally bound to break loose from this load, and to drag it no longer. For, so long as they drag it, they cannot exercise the rights of manhood, nor enjoy the blessings, nor fulfil the high purposes, of human existence. Is it said, that the Government, for whose wars they

are now paying, would have been overthrown, but for these wars? I answer, that the Government, which involved its subjects in those wars, was the greatest curse of those subjects, and is the greatest curse of their successors. The maintenance of such a Government is loss. Its overthrow is gain.

I do not deny, that the case is possible, in which a generation would be morally bound to assume the debt created by its predecessor. But, even then, such generation should be the sole judge of its obligation to assume the debt. Were the cholera raging over the whole length and breadth of our land, and sweeping off millions of our people; and were a foreign nation to minister to our relief by lending us money; if we could not repay the loan, our successors should: and such a loan they would be glad to repay.

I would incidentally remark, that Civil Government will be neither honest nor frugal, so long as the practice of war is continued. I say so, for the reason, that the extensive means necessary to carry on wars, or pay war debts, cannot be obtained by direct taxation. The people will consent to their being obtained only by indirect taxation: and no Government ever was, or ever will be, either honest or frugal, whose expenses are defrayed by indirect taxation; for no Government, whose expenses are thus defrayed, ever was, or ever will be, held to a strict responsibility by the people: and no Government, not held to such responsibility, ever was, or ever will be, either honest or frugal.

I have referred to the loss of life and property by war—of life, that is so precious—of property, that is so indispensable to the enjoyment and usefulness of life. But there is an unspeakably greater loss than this, with which war is also chargeable. I refer to the damage, which morals and religion suffer from it. All I need add, on this point, is, that the power of war to demoralize the world, and to corrupt the purest religion in the world, is abundantly manifest in the fact, that the moral and religious sense of even good men is not shocked by war. No stronger argument can be brought against war than the fact of its power to conform the morals and religion of the world to war.

It would, perhaps, be wrong to ascribe the continuance of war to the low and perverted state of the moral and reli-

gious sense. It would, perhaps, be more proper to ascribe it to the prevailing delusion, that war is unavoidable. And, yet, it may be, that a better state of the moral and religious sense would have entirely prevented this delusion. But, however this delusion may be accounted for, or whatever may be responsible for it, it is consoling to know, that it is not so well nigh impossible to dispel it, as is generally supposed. A fresh baptism of wisdom and goodness may, perhaps, be needed to that end: but no new faculties, and not a new birth. Nay, were we to apply to the subject of war no more than our present stock of good sense and good feeling—no more than our mental and moral faculties, as they now are—it is probable, that war could not long withstand the application.

The doctrine, that war is a necessity, is the greatest of all libels on man. The confidence, which, in private life, we manifest in each other, proves, that it is such a libel. We walk the streets unarmed. We go to bed without fear, and with unlocked doors: and we thus prove, that we regard our fellow-men as our friends, and not our foes—as disposed to protect, and not to harm, us. It is true, that there is, here and there, one, that would rob us; and, at very far wider intervals, one, that would kill us. But we are at rest in the consciousness, that, where there is one to assail us, there are a hundred to defend us. Indeed, society could not be held together, were it not true, that the generality of men are swayed by love, and confidence, and generosity, existing either in their own hearts, or accorded by them to others. The men, who are swayed by distrust and hatred, constitute the exceptional cases.

Have I, then, an evil-minded neighbor? I, nevertheless, need not fight with him. I may rely, under God, upon the mass of my neighbors to protect me against him. So, too, if there is, here and there, a malicious American, and, here and there, a malicious Englishman, who would be guilty of involving their countries in a war with each other; nevertheless, the mass of Americans and Englishmen, inasmuch as they prefer international amity to international quarrels, should be relied on to preserve peace: and they would preserve it, if so relied on. Now, it is in this point of view, that the nation, which is determined to keep out of war, will never find itself involved in war; and that nothing is hazarded

by adopting the peace policy. I add, that, as it is not in human nature, under its ordinary influences, and in its ordinary circumstances, to fall upon an unarmed and unresisting man, so the nation, which puts its trust, not in weapons of war, but in the fraternal affections of the human heart, and in the God, who planted those affections there, will find this trust an effectual shield from the horrors of war. Such a shield did the good men, who founded Pennsylvania, find this trust. During the seventy years of this trust, there was no blood shed in their Province. These good men subdued even the savage heart, simply by trusting that heart. These good men, by refusing to carry deadly weapons themselves, shamed even savages out of carrying them. And were America, now, to disarm herself, even to the extent of abandoning the policy and practice of war, and were she to cast herself for protection on the world's heart, she would find that heart worthy of being so trusted. The other nations of the earth would not only be ashamed to take advantage of her disarmament, but they would love their confiding sister too well to do so. Nay, more. Instead of making her exposed condition an occasion for their malevolence, they would be moved to reciprocate the confidence expressed by that condition, and to disarm themselves.

I have already admitted, that there are persons, who would wrong us—who would even plunder and kill us. I now admit, that Government is bound to provide against them. If, on the one hand, I protest against stamping the masses with the desperate character of these rare individuals, on the other, I admit, that we are to guard against these rare individuals. But to argue, that, because of the existence of these rare individuals in France, or England, or any other nation, the nation itself is necessarily disposed to make war upon us, is to make the exceptions to the rule, instead of the rule itself, the basis of the argument.

Whilst, for the reason, that I believe, that there is no need of war, I believe there is no need of making preparation against it, I, nevertheless, admit, that there is need of Government, of prisons, and of an armed police. Whilst, I hold, that a nation, whose Government is just, in all its dealings with its own subjects, and with foreigners, and which so far confides in, and honors, human nature, as to

trust, that even nations are capable of the reciprocations of justice—ay, and the reciprocations of love, also—I say, whilst I hold, that such a nation needs to make no provision against war, I still admit, that it is bound, in common with every other nation, to have ever in readiness, both on sea and land, a considerable armed force, to be wielded, as occasions may require, against the *hostes humani generis*—the enemies of the human race—the pirates, that, both on land and sea, “lurk privily for the innocent prey.”

But what shall be the character—the intellectual and moral character—of the men proper to compose this armed force? No other question in this discussion is so important; and, perhaps, in the whole range of earthly interests, there is not a more important question. The answer, which I shall give to this question, is a very novel one: so novel, indeed, that, were I not irresistibly impressed with its truth and value, I should not venture to give it.

The punishment of its own offending citizens is, confessedly, regarded as being, in all its stages, a most solemn and responsible duty. Laws to this end are enacted with considerateness and solemnity. It is claimed, that none but wise and just men are fit to enact them. Judges and jurors are considerate and solemn in applying the laws; and none, but the upright and intelligent, are allowed to be suitable persons for judges and jurors. All this is indispensable to maintain the moral influence and the majesty of the laws. But how fatally would this majesty be dishonored, and this moral influence be broken, if all this propriety and all this consistency were, then, to be followed up with the gross impropriety and gross inconsistency of committing the execution of the verdict, or decree, of the court-room to the hands of the profligate and base. Most clear is it, that the turnkey and hangman should not fall below the lawmaker or judge, in dignity and excellence of character. I am aware, that it was once thought, that the vilest man in the community was the most appropriate man for hangman. But sounder thinking requires, that the hangman, if there must be a hangman, should be one of the noblest and holiest of men.

Such is my argument—and, I trust, it is a conclusive one—in favor of a solemn and dignified execution of the laws of Government against its offending subjects. But

cannot a similar, and a no less conclusive, argument be made in favor of such an execution of its laws against foreign offenders, also? Most certainly. It is admitted, that the greatest wisdom and considerateness are necessary in deciding on so solemn a measure as war. But, just here, the amazing impropriety, the fatal inconsistency, occurs, of intrusting the execution of the declaration of war to those, who are, for the most part, profligate and base—the very scum and refuse of society. Not only so, but it is insisted, and that, too, by good men, and by the friends of peace, that the profligate and base are the peculiarly fit persons to fill up the ranks of the armies—the peculiarly fit persons to be “food for powder.” They believe, with Napoleon, that “the worse the man, the better the soldier;” and with Wellington, that “the men, who have nice scruples about religion, have no business to be soldiers.” A sad mistake, however, is this, on the part of the good men I have referred to. They should insist, that none but the virtuous and intelligent are fit to be armed men. Peace men are wont to complain, that war is too much honored. But if there must be war, it should be far more honored than it is; and, to have it so, none but the intelligent and virtuous are to be thought worthy of fighting its battles. Of such persons, and of such only, would I have the national police consist: that police, which is the fit and needed substitute for war-armies and war-navies. Surely, they, who man the vessel, that is to go forth against the pirates of the ocean, and they, who take up arms to vindicate defied justice on the land, should be men of virtue, and not vice—intelligent, and not ignorant. The wicked and the vile will not fail to justify their wickedness, if it is the wicked and the vile, who undertake their punishment. But if wisdom and virtue are arrayed against them, there is hope, that they may be awed, or shamed, out of their wickedness.

The armed forces of the world are looked upon as a mere brute power. Composed, as I would have them composed, there would still be an ample amount of brute power in them; but there would, also, be in them the far more important element of moral power. I say far more important; for disturbers of the peace, and transgressors of the laws, would be far more controlled by the presence of the moral

than the presence of the brute power. Indeed, the brute power itself would then be viewed very differently from what it now is. Now, it kindles the wrath, and, oftentimes, the contempt of those against whom it is arrayed. But, then, commended, honored, sanctified by the moral influence, with which it would stand associated, it would be respected, and submitted to, by many, who, but for that association, would despise and resist it. That men of conscience and virtue are respected and feared by their enemies; and that their conscience and virtue make their hearts none the less courageous and their arms none the less strong; was well illustrated by Cromwell's never-defeated armies.

With my conceptions of the character proper for those, who are to compose the armed police of a nation, it is not strange, that I, too, would be in favor of military and naval schools; and that I would have them far more numerously attended than such schools now are. But the military and naval schools, that I would be in favor of, would not be an appendage of the war system. They would not look to the possibility of war: and, of course, they would not train their pupils for war. Nevertheless, they would train them for the most effective service against the enemies of the human race; and to this end they would impart the highest scientific, literary, and moral education.

I said, that I would have none, but the virtuous and intelligent, for the armed men of the nation. They should be gentlemen: and, all the better, if christians and scholars also. They should be among the most honored of men—both from their high office, as conservators of the public safety, and from their intrinsic merits. But, alas, what a contrast between such men and the vast majority of those, who compose the armies of the world! To that vast majority Government gives out grog, as swill is given out to hogs. From the backs of that vast majority many statesmen are reluctant to hold back the lash. Of course, I refer not to mere "sentimentalists," but to those intellectual persons, who, in the esteem of the gentleman of Alabama, are alone capable of rising "into the dignity of statesmen."

We, often, hear it said, that the policeman of London is a gentleman. He should be. But if he, who is charged

with the preservation of the peace, and safety, and order of a city, needs to be a gentleman, how much more should he be a gentleman, whose office is to care, in this wise, for a nation and for the world!

But, it will be said, that men of the elevated character with which I would fill up our armed forces, would not be content with the present wages of the common sailor and common soldier. It is true, that they would not; and, that they should not. Their wages should be several times greater. But, it must be remembered, on the other hand, that one of such men would be worth fifty of the present kind of armed men for preserving the world's peace. Nay, the armed men of the world are of a kind continually to hazard the peace of the world.

I said, that there is no need of preparing against war. I add, that preparation against war provokes to it, instead of preventing it. If England makes it, then is France provoked to a counter preparation. And, what is not less, but much more, each nation, having made such preparation, is tempted to use it. If these nations line their respective coasts with cannon, it is but natural, that they should long to try the efficiency of their cannon on each other's ships. "To what purpose is all this waste?" will be the reproachful inquiry, which they will put to themselves, whilst they suffer this vastly expensive preparation to lie idle. If the maxim: "To prepare for war is to prevent war," were ever true, it must have been in those remote ages, when such preparation cost but little time and money. It, certainly, is not true, when much time and scores of millions are expended in such preparation.

But, to return to the bill. I would, that it might be defeated; and that the bill for building vessels-of-war might be defeated; and that the President's recommendations for increasing the army and navy might find no favor. For the legitimate purposes of a national armed police, the army and navy are already sufficiently large. What is lacking in them is an elevation of intellectual and moral character; and how to supply that lack I have already indicated.

But, it is asked: "What shall we do with the surplus money in the Treasury?" I answer: "Use it in paying our debts." We owe many honest debts—and some of them to persons, who are suffering for the payment of them.

We shall be, altogether, without excuse, if, when our Treasury is overflowing, we do not pay them; but, instead thereof, indulge a mad war passion in building ships, and in making other war preparations. Remember, too, that the debt, which we incurred in our superlatively mean and wicked war with Mexico is not all paid. I hope, that we shall pay it; and not leave it to posterity to be obliged to pay it, or repudiate it. But it may also be asked: "What shall we do with the future surplus money in the Treasury?" I answer: "Have none." We should have none, either by adopting free trade, or by doing what is the next best thing—raising the tariff to the level of a full protection. The mixture of free trade and protection is a miserable compound. But it may also be asked: "What shall we then do for means to carry on the Government?" I answer, that, when we shall no longer have war to support, and are weaned from the extravagances and follies, which are cherished and begotten by that dazzling and bewitching and befooling barbarism, it will not cost more than one tenth as much, as it now does, to defray the cost of administering Government; and that tenth the people will be willing to be directly taxed for.

But I have consumed the most of my hour, and must close. Do not pass any of these war bills. Do not so cruel, so foolish, so wicked a thing. Cruel it will be to the poor, who will have to pay these millions of fresh taxes; for, remember, Sir, that it is they, who have to pay them. The toiling poor are the only creators of wealth. Such as ourselves, are but the conduits of wealth. Foolish it will be, because the more you expend in this wise, the more will it be felt necessary to expend; and because the more you seek to protect your country in this wise, the less will she be protected. Wicked it will be, because war, in all its phases, is one of the most horrid crimes against God and man.

I have made my appeals, Sir, in the name of reason and religion, both of which condemn war. Let not these appeals, which are made to our higher nature—to all, that is pure, and holy, and sublime within us—be overborne by the counter appeals, which are made in the name of a vulgar patriotism, and which are all addressed to our lower nature—to our passion, pride, and prejudice—our love of conquest, and power, and plunder.

There is, just now, an opportunity for Congress to do a better thing than to indulge and foment the spirit of war. Our Government, as I am informed, is negotiating a commercial treaty with England. From what I learn of its provisions, I rejoice in it. I trust, that it will be consummated, and go into full effect. It will well dispose of the fishery difficulties. It will open to us reciprocal free trade, in natural productions, with the British North American Provinces; and so lead the way for our reciprocal free trade with those Provinces in all productions—in the works of men's hands, as well as in the fruits of God's earth; and so lead the way, I may add, for such unrestricted trade between ourselves and other countries also. I regret, that our Government has, hitherto, been so slow to embrace the liberal overtures of our northern neighbors. I trust, that no sectional, or other unworthy, jealousies will avail to hold us back, any longer, from embracing these overtures. Let not Maine fear a new competition in lumber and ship-building; nor Pennsylvania in coal; nor Ohio in wheat. These States will lose nothing in these respects; and, if they should lose anything, their loss will be inconsiderable, in comparison with their rich gain from free trade in natural productions with a country whose trade with us has doubled in the last seven years, and our exports to which are double her exports to us. Her trade with us in 1852 amounted to nearly seventeen millions of dollars. And let not the unworthy cavil be repeated, that these Provinces offer us free trade in natural productions only. How could they carry on their Governments, were they to consent to free trade in all productions? Is it said, that they could by direct taxation? But it does not lie in the mouth of a Tariff nation like ours to say so. I repeat it—I rejoice in this treaty. To accomplish such a blessing for our own country, for the British Provinces, and for the world, will be an imperishable honor to this Administration.

I am informed, that our Government is negotiating a commercial treaty with France also. Now, how happy if this House would use its great influence to get inserted in both these treaties an arbitration clause—a clause submitting international disagreements to a wise, disinterested, peaceful arbitrament! How happy, if this House would pass a resolution to this effect! An arbitration clause in

our treaties with those nations would render war between them and us well nigh morally impossible. And such a clause would prepare the way for the establishment of an international court—that great desideratum of the world. Would that our country might participate most promptly and most largely in the glory of achieving that desideratum! We have already, the village court, and the county court, and the district court, and the state court, and the national court; and, were it proposed to abolish one of these courts, and to let differences between men take their own course, and run into violence and bloodshed, such proposition would be regarded as a proposition to return to barbarism. But, Sir, I trust, that the day is near at hand, when it will be thought to be barbarous not to have an international court.

Sir, I have done. Rapidly, very rapidly, has the world advanced in civilization, the last forty years. The great reason why it has, is, that, during this period, it has been comparatively exempt from the curse of war. Let the world continue to advance thus rapidly in civilization; and let our nation continue to advance with it. During these forty years, our nation has generally gone forward in the cause of peace. In its war with Mexico, it took a wide step backward. God grant that it may never take another step backward, in this cause! God grant, that, in respect to this dear and sacred cause, our nation may adopt the motto on one side of the standard of the immortal Hampden: "*Nulla vestigia retrorsum*"—no steps backward: and, having done this, it will have good ground to hope for its realization of the blessing of the motto on the other side of that patriot's standard: "God with us."

Pass these war bills, Sir, and carry out the President's recommendations, and you will contribute to roll along that deep and broad stream of sin and sorrow, which war has rolled down through every age of the world. But defeat these bills, and frown upon these recommendations, and there will be joy on earth, and joy in heaven.

MR. HOUSTON, of Alabama. I ask the previous question upon this bill. The previous question was seconded, and the main question ordered to be put.

The SPEAKER. The question is now upon ordering the bill to be engrossed, and read the third time.

The question was then taken, and it was decided in the affirmative; and the bill, being engrossed, was read the third time, and passed.